

DOI 10.1515/anglia-2014-0049

**David Kennedy.** *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012, 196 pp., £ 55.00.

Multiple collections by contemporary poets dedicated to the work of artists; numerous poetry volumes, often even commissioned by museums and art galleries, where poets respond to artworks; the proliferation of ekphrasis in the contemporary writing scene is a phenomenon easily observable but perhaps more difficult to account for. The new study on ekphrasis by David Kennedy turns to creative writing classrooms, to museum engagement programs, and above all to contemporary British poetry to account for this ekphrastic boom in the late twentieth century, and to offer useful and illuminating differentiations in the recent, lively debate on the poetics of ekphrasis. Questions on media relations and media borders have been at the forefront of critical debates, with ekphrasis enjoying a vivid critical and creative revival in the late twentieth century. Despite being anchored in post-war British poetry, Kennedy's study approaches ekphrasis not so much as a poetic sub-genre, but as a prevailing cultural practice. The driving force behind the book seeks to revise the representational model of ekphrasis, a model that has dominated the theorisation of the term in Anglo-American Inter-arts criticism. In this attempt to problematise common tropes of ekphrasis, the often quoted 1993 definition of ekphrasis by James Heffernan, according to whom ekphrasis is "the verbal representation of visual representation", is the obvious target of Kennedy's critique. He interrogates the limiting association of ekphrasis with representation, an association that overlooks other equally important, timely and overlooked aspects, identified by Kennedy as enquiry and critique.

According to Kennedy, Heffernan's "representation" is not an easily defined category as, even if it designates description as ekphrasis often does, the limits between narrative and description are often blurred. And it is the ekphrastic practice of many twentieth and twenty-first century British poets that challenge this representational model, putting forward ekphrasis as a turning-point, and re-imagining the interaction between spectator and work of art. Therefore, moving beyond representation to "new critical approaches to ekphrasis" (15) is one of the main objectives of the present volume, and here Kennedy is joined by continental critics such as Claus Clüver and Hans Lund who also propose a different order of priorities for the ekphrastic act, emphasizing notions of re-writing, translation, but also combination, integration and transformation.

As Kennedy argues, another common trope of ekphrasis criticism highlights the paragonal struggle between word and image with each art “vying for supremacy” (28). Lessing’s very influential dichotomous pronouncement on the unique abilities of poetry to represent time versus those of sculpture to represent space has bequeathed this ‘medium specificity’ obsession to modernist aesthetics, and for a long time overwhelmed the agenda of Interarts criticism. Instead, Kennedy proposes the notion of encounter between art work and poem as a conceptual location that transgresses the rivalry rhetoric and turns attention to this unexpected meeting between poem/poet and artwork; a meeting that, according to Kennedy, triggers a change of direction, like “two spheres of action coming into contact, with a consequent change of direction or velocity” (31). Based on this, he offers a new definition according to which “ekphrasis is a verbal representation of an encounter with a work of art represented in the form and conventions of another medium” (31). Kennedy’s proposal to move from paragon to encounter draws on new theoretical models, namely on Krzysztof Ziarek’s conception of the art work as a force field or “forcework”. Kennedy employs Ziarek’s pronouncement in the *The Force of Art* that “the work of art is first and foremost a spatial-temporal [...] play of forces” (qtd. in Kennedy 2012: 32), to support his own dynamic vision of the ekphrastic encounter. He extends Ziarek’s argument, namely that artworks are seen not so much as objects but as events that occur each and every time they are encountered, to capture exactly what in his view the ekphrastic poem attends to; this encounter with the event of art.

Having put forward his objections to established ekphrastic criticism and subsequently introduced a new set of vocabulary, Kennedy then proceeds to test this new vocabulary in the established canon of ekphrastic poetry. For anyone even newly versed in the genre there is a recognisable canon of poems that are to be found in almost every context in which ekphrasis is discussed: Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, W.H. Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts* and John Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. In chapter two, “Re-framing the Ekphrastic Canon”, Kennedy offers close re-readings in light not of the traditional tropes of ekphrasis criticism (i. e. envoicing the silent image, transforming the static pose into narrative, enacting the struggle of power between word and image), but in the framework of the ekphrastic encounter. This enables him to proceed to a comparative reading of the poems while being in dialogue with a number of new critical voices who have written on this ekphrastic canon (Caws, Benton, Bergman-Loizeaux, and Yacobi among others).

This established canon is in need of extension and differentiation, and therefore part two of the study turns to the most important contribution of the volume, to the consideration of a large volume of twentieth-century British po-

etry in the wake of Keats and Auden. Kennedy's readings of two parallel traditions of post-war British poetry, one belonging to the mainstream (poets including Simon Armitage and James Fenton) and one to the experimental vein (poets including Andrew Crozier and Adrian Clarke), reveal that there is on one side a "strong narrativizing impulse" and on the other the desire to see the work of art as a site of meaning formation (64). What emerges from his subsequent discussion of contemporary British poetry, via the close-reading of poems by Roy Fisher, Peter Hughes, and Kelvin Corconan, is that the work of the poets themselves modify ekphrasis, rendering definitions and critical approaches "limited and, in fact, historical" (69).

In his discussion of Fenton's poem *The Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford*, Kennedy suggests that in many poems "museum location is an important aspect of twentieth-century ekphrastic writing" (59). Ending his examination of contemporary writing, he returns to the museum space to consider two anthologies of ekphrastic poetry published by the Tate Gallery, *Voices in the Gallery* and *With a Poet's Eye: A Tate Gallery Anthology*. In their respective introductions, Kennedy finds telling indications of the manner ekphrasis is deployed in the museum setting. There is "a conflicted desire for the successful ekphrastic poem to have an independent life but at the same time be in a synergistic relation with their source work" (79). In the collections's curatorial view the poem seems like "a glorified information tag", without a life of its own, only appreciated via its dependence on its subject.

Part three turns to a much needed differentiation within ekphrasis criticism to examine ekphrastic poetry by British women poets. There is a double objective here; on the one hand to recover a female tradition of ekphrastic writing, and on the other to unravel and critique the gendered binaries of much ekphrastic criticism by questioning the largely unexamined gendered nature of ekphrasis: the rhetoric of the silent female image, which is controlled and enlivened by the male voice. Kennedy argues that "a distinctive female ekphrastic mode can be traced in ekphrastic poetry by women" (90). He seeks to bring it forward by drawing on the theoretical work of Kaja Silverman on the female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema, and on Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's theorisation of the 'matrixial gaze'. He starts by advocating that the re-conceptualisation of the genre of elegy by feminist critics has an affinity with what is only just starting to happen in ekphrasis criticism: the emergence of a "recuperable tradition". Kennedy brings to critical attention little known early examples of ekphrastic poetry by women from the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Anne King, Elizabeth Thomas, and Martha Sansom) highlighting their demand that, instead of operating in a paragonal manner, "the verbal and the visual can and should operate together" (105). After discussion of two nineteenth-century examples (Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth

Barrett Browning), Kennedy turns to the astonishing volume of ekphrastic poetry by women produced in the last fifty years, and among them selects works by Frances Presley, Pauline Steiner, and Elizabeth Garrett. Through these contemporary voices characteristics of a specifically female ekphrasis emerge, such as the description of an artwork as an experienced process rather than a completed object, a critique of the gendered nature of iconography, the perception of art works from multiple viewpoints, and finally “the encounter between work of art and spectator as a moment in which meaning is coming-into-being” (116).

The next section, “Beyond Paining”, designates the “Elsewhere” of the title and departs from the discussion of poetry to turn to ekphrasis in other media and discourses. The section on philosophical writing about art adds significantly to the project of differentiating ekphrasis and extending the ekphrastic canon, as it attends to the category recently designated by Steven Cheeke as “prose ekphrasis”. The chapter on “Ekphrasis in Film and TV” sits somewhat uncomfortably in a study otherwise concerned with textual encounters, but offers nonetheless illuminating insights by reading image manipulation in films such as Antonioni’s *Blow Up* and *Blade Runner*. These insights need to be read back to the ekphrastic poetry of the previous chapters in order to suggest that “ekphrasis is less about representation and more about manipulation” (144). The discussion of ekphrastic poetry about photographs that takes up chapter nine offers another revealing differentiation within the ekphrastic genre that has received very little attention, and opens up a space for discussing the real and surface, memory and desire. In the last section of the book, entitled “From Creative Writing to Poetic Inquiry”, Kennedy offers an astute account of the interrelation between the proliferation of the genre and the rise of the creative writing programs in higher education; possibly one of the most original new angles for explicating the ekphrastic boom. As the author observes, “the rise in ekphrastic poetry happens at the same time as the establishment and continued growth of creative writing as a pedagogic practice” (14). In the framework of this pedagogical practice, ekphrastic exercises interrogate the work of art and promote the aspect of inquiry Kennedy has identified as emerging in contemporary ekphrasis.

Kennedy’s study reminds us that although critics have been observing and recording an ekphrastic boom that seems to have been in operation in the 70s and 80s as much as it is now, accounting for this ekphrastic boom proves to be a challenging task. His study succeeds in offering multiple insights into the proliferation of the genre. The moments of true affective contemplation in Kennedy’s study, as he wonders on the poets’ insistent need to write in the ekphrastic mode, converge around the question of whether, through the ekphrastic impulse, art and poetry can be “habitable/useable spaces” (72), the way language

is. The contemplation of art-works in museums is a distant, depersonalised act, with the artworks “stand[ing] apart from us and our daily lives” (6), untouchable with an immutable form. Kennedy sees in ekphrasis a desire and attempt to “bring art into the realm of our contingency” (6), opening it up to the possibilities of narrative and the moral order of language. Elegantly written, with astute close readings of poems from within the contemporary British writing scene, Kennedy’s study is a very welcome addition to the growing number of studies which attend to, explain, and differentiate the growing corpus of ekphrastic writing in Britain.